The Rapture: A Popular but False Doctrine

Cecil Maranville

Aug 1, 2008

9 minutes read time

The rapture, often called "the blessed hope," is sadly more hoax than hope, even though the man who started it had no intention of deceiving anyone. You need to know what the Bible actually says!

The rapture is widely taught and believed in Christianity today. Popular books and movies spin themes around this doctrine that essentially teaches Christ will come back twice, first coming only into the atmosphere to snatch believers away to heaven for several years; then actually returning to set foot on the earth.

We live in a time when most are content to get their knowledge of religion secondhand, preferably through dramatic presentations, including stage, screen and novels.

But you cannot afford to neglect your personal responsibility to prove the truth!

Those willing to take a careful look at the Bible will see that the rapture theory doesn't stand up to the scrutiny of God's Word.

The rapture was popularized in the 1970s by Hal Lindsey's writings (*The Late Great Planet Earth,* etc.) and more recently by Jim Jenkins and Tim LaHaye in their *Left Behind* fictional books and films. But where did the idea of the rapture originate?

The origin of the rapture theory

Credit for its origin generally goes to John Nelson Darby, a 19th-century

theologian.

Let's define some common terms to help one navigate the technicalities, for in reading about the rapture, you will often encounter the words *postmillennialism, amillennialism* and *premillennialism*. First, the root word, *Millennium,* comes from the Latin for 1,000 years. Religiously, it refers to the first 1,000 years of Christ's reign over the Kingdom of God on earth (Revelation 20:4).

A postmillennialist believes that Christ returns to establish the Kingdom on earth after the 1,000 years; an amillennialist doesn't believe that the Kingdom is coming at all; a premillennialist believes that Christ returns before the Millennium to set up His Kingdom as described in Revelation 20:4.

In the century before Darby, Daniel Whitby pushed the philosophy of postmillennialism in England. "This interpretation maintains that present gospel agencies will root out evils until Christ will have a spiritual reign over the earth, which will continue for 1,000 years. Then the second advent of Christ will initiate judgment and bring to an end the present order" (*Unger's Bible Dictionary,* 1988, "Millennium").

Postmillennialism gives life to the idea of "the social gospel" and the belief that the Church can actually bring about the Kingdom by its actions. It has led to many Christian churches involving themselves in politics on the premise that they are virtually obligated to lobby governments in the direction of godliness.

There were also amillennialists in Darby's day. He labored to correct both false teachings. Darby believed, rightly, that Jesus Christ would return to earth to establish and rule over the Kingdom of God. Darby was a premillennialist.

But in his zeal for countering error, he added another—the rapture theory. He believed he understood a new truth, an idea that had not been taught in the history of Christendom. While he was most likely sincere, sincerity alone does not make one right.

"Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20, New International Version).

How do we know whether God inspired John Darby with new understanding? It actually would not be difficult to verify. Jesus said, "...the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35), meaning Scripture agrees within itself.

If the rapture were truly a biblical doctrine, it would mesh with all other scriptural references to Christ's coming. But it does not stand up to that test, as we will see.

Scofield picks it up

"Darby's pre-tribulational view of the rapture was then picked up by a man named C.I. Scofield, who taught the view in the footnotes of his Scofield Reference Bible, which was widely distributed in England and America. Many Protestants who read the Scofield Reference Bible uncritically accepted what its footnotes said and adopted the [rapture doctrine], even though no Christian had heard of it in the previous 1800 years of Church history" ("Catholic Answers," http://www.catholic.com/library/Rapture.asp).

Both Darby and Scofield claimed that the "day of Christ" refers to the rapture and that "the day of the Lord" refers to the actual second coming several years after the rapture.

In fact, "the day of the Lord" and "the day of Christ" both refer to Christ's return to the earth throughout the Bible—that is, to the time when He will step foot on earth. So also do the phrases, "the day of the Lord Jesus Christ" and "the Lord's Day." They all speak of His actual descent and setting His feet on this earth (Zechariah 14:1-4). This fact further discredits this principal premise of Darby and Scofield.

The heart of the case offered by Darby, Scofield and their modern counterparts is based upon the English words "caught up" in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

Thin proof

For such a seemingly major doctrine, one might expect a weighty argument, but this is what is offered in The Scofield Bible's Reference Notes (1917 Edition): "...'caught up'—Not church saints only, but all bodies of the saved [that is, not only the living, but also the dead], of whatever dispensation, are included in the first resurrection... [It] is peculiarly the 'blessed hope' of the Church (cf) Matthew 24:42; 25:13; Luke 12:36-48; Acts 1:11; Philippians 3:20, 21; Titus 2:11-13."

This offers surprisingly little information, considering how many accept the rapture doctrine based upon these notes. Additionally, all of the references he cited are about Christ's return and the believer's need to be ready for that event. None of them speak of a "near return" by Christ to snatch away believers.

Some rapturists today cite Acts 8:39, saying it uses the same Greek word that is translated "caught up" in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. They say that the fact the Spirit of God "caught [Philip] away" shows that 1 Thessalonians 4:17 means that the saints are caught away to heaven. Yet the Spirit did not transport Philip to heaven, but rather from one place on the earth to another.

The saints of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, on the other hand, rise to meet the Lord in the air. (We'll cover more on this point in the next article in this series.)

The words "blessed hope" also often appear in rapture literature. In fact, "The Blessed Hope" is the name by which some denominations refer to the rapture doctrine. They take "blessed hope" from Titus 2:13, where Paul writes, "looking for the blessed hope, and the appearance of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."

The implication is that the word "appearance" conveys something secretive and sudden; that is, the rapture. Therefore, "blessed hope" becomes a sort of shorthand for the rapture in literature and films on the doctrine. A few other New Testament references that mention "the appearing of Christ" are also often cited, as if these scriptures strengthen their case.

But all of these are simply referring to Christ's coming, either the first time as a perfect sacrifice for sin, or the second time, as an invincible King.

Flawed foundation

The word *rapture* comes from the Latin *rapere,* meaning, "to seize" or "to abduct." It is translated from the Greek word that is rendered "caught up" in English Bibles today.

All advocates of the rapture agree that the main argument is based on 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Here the argument stands or falls.

First, look at verse 17 in the New King James Version: "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord."

The Greek verb for "caught up" is *harpagesometha.* Does it convey the sense of an abduction here? No, "[it] combines the ideas of force and suddenness seen in the irresistible power of God" (Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries,* Revised Edition, 1984, p. 94).

Why would Paul use such a strong word? Let's allow the Bible to speak for itself. The context of the subject begins in verse 13 and concludes in verse 11 of the next chapter. Paul wrote this section of the letter in answer to concerns of the local Christians.

As you read verse 13, you discover that Christians in Thessalonica were grieving over the unexpected deaths of members of their congregation.

Albert Barnes comments: "There seems some reason to suppose...that some of them believed that, though those who were dead would indeed rise again, yet it would be long after those who were living when the Lord Jesus would return had been taken to glory, and would always be in a condition inferior to them" (*Barnes' Notes on the New Testament,* notes on 1 Thessalonians 4:13).

Paul wrote that they should not grieve over this: "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus [believers who had died]" (verse 14).

Was he responding to a worry about whether Christ would rescue believers from the Great Tribulation? No, nothing is said of this.

Nor is there anything in these verses that intimates Christ making a swooping pass by the earth to snatch off a few people to take them to heaven. These verses refer only to the doctrine of the second coming, at which time Jesus sets foot on the earth.

A reunion with friends who died

There is more to Paul's encouragement. Dr. Morris observes, "There will be a reunion with Christ, but there will also be a reunion with the friends who have gone before" (Tyndale).

The Commentary on the Whole Bible by Jamieson, Fausset and Brown observes something further. "The leading topic of Paul's preaching at Thessalonica having been the coming kingdom (Acts 17:7), some perverted it into a cause for fear in respect to friends lately deceased, as if these would be excluded from the glory which those found alive alone should share. This error Paul here corrects."

Verse 15 amplifies the point: "We who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep."

Verse 18 reiterates this main point: "Therefore comfort one another with these words." Paul sums it up in verses 10-11 of chapter 5 (there is no chapter break in the original text): "...that whether we wake or sleep [remain alive or die], we should live together with Him. Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing."

Any claim that "the comfort" of these verses was about being snatched away to heaven takes incredible license with the Bible.

Paul's reason for using such a strong word as *harpagesometha* was to reassure people that, at Christ's return, God would reunite believers who remain alive with believers who had died. The dead won't be behind in any way!

But why will the saints meet Christ in the air? We will cover that in the next article.

Original Link:
https://www.ucg.org/world-news-and-prophecy/the-rapture-a-popular-but-false-doctrine